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# CH'AN NEWS LETTER

No. 113 February, 1996

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## Enlightenment and Buddhahood

A talk given by Master Sheng-yen at the Chan Meditation Center on Oct. 30, 1994, and edited by Kathy Sova and Harry Miller

In Chinese the term translated as enlightenment consists of two characters, so the meaning may seem to have two parts. The characters seem to mean something different, but actually they constitute one term. In English we either use the word "enlightenment," or "awakening."

An unenlightened person is in a state of sleep, a dream state, continually dreaming through births and deaths. The enlightened have awakened from this dream. Buddhahood and awakening are one and the same.

This morning, in a short talk during the meditation session, I introduced the idea of using, but not attaching. Some related ideas: utilize but do not possess; share do but not to monopolize. Are they related to enlightenment?

Attachment is vexation; possessive mentality is vexation; attempting to monopolize is vexation. But with wisdom we may make use of anything, and that need not be vexation. There are many things we do not share: a wife, a husband, savings, etc. This is not to say that the enlightened share their wives or husbands. But they have no self-interest, and they make available whatever is necessary to help others. This is the attitude of a Bodhisattva.

Is the enlightenment we have spoken about the same as "instantaneous enlightenment"? We often speak of instantaneous enlightenment and gradual enlightenment. The end results are the same, but the methods to achieve those results may be what we call instantaneous or they may be gradual.

What I will speak about next is difficult to understand.

The *Parinirvana Sutra* states that anyone directly on the Mahayana path is considered to be on the instantaneous enlightenment path, whereas anyone proceeding along the Hinayana path before they enter the Mahayana tradition is considered to be on the gradual path (i.e. moving sequentially from one stage to another). There are two Hinayana levels. The first is called Sravaka, literally,



"sound-hearers", meaning disciples of the Buddha who achieved arhathood through hearing his words. The second is called Pratyeka Buddha, those people who reach enlightenment by observing conditioned arising.

I addressed everyone here as Bodhisattvas. This is to say that we are all followers of the instantaneous enlightenment path. This does not mean that we are enlightened already. But do not underestimate yourselves, enlightenment may be at hand.

In *The Essentials of Entering into the Path of Instantaneous Enlightenment*, a book by a famous Ch'an master, it says, "What is meant by instantaneous enlightenment? Instantaneously, all illusory thinking is eliminated. And, enlightenment is when there is nothing to be attained." Let me rephrase this. "Awakening," here, means "nothing being attained." The passage continues: "That one who has instantaneous enlightenment can attain liberation within this lifetime." Eliminate illusory thinking (sometimes translated as "wandering thoughts"), and your vexations and attachments disappear, leaving only liberation.

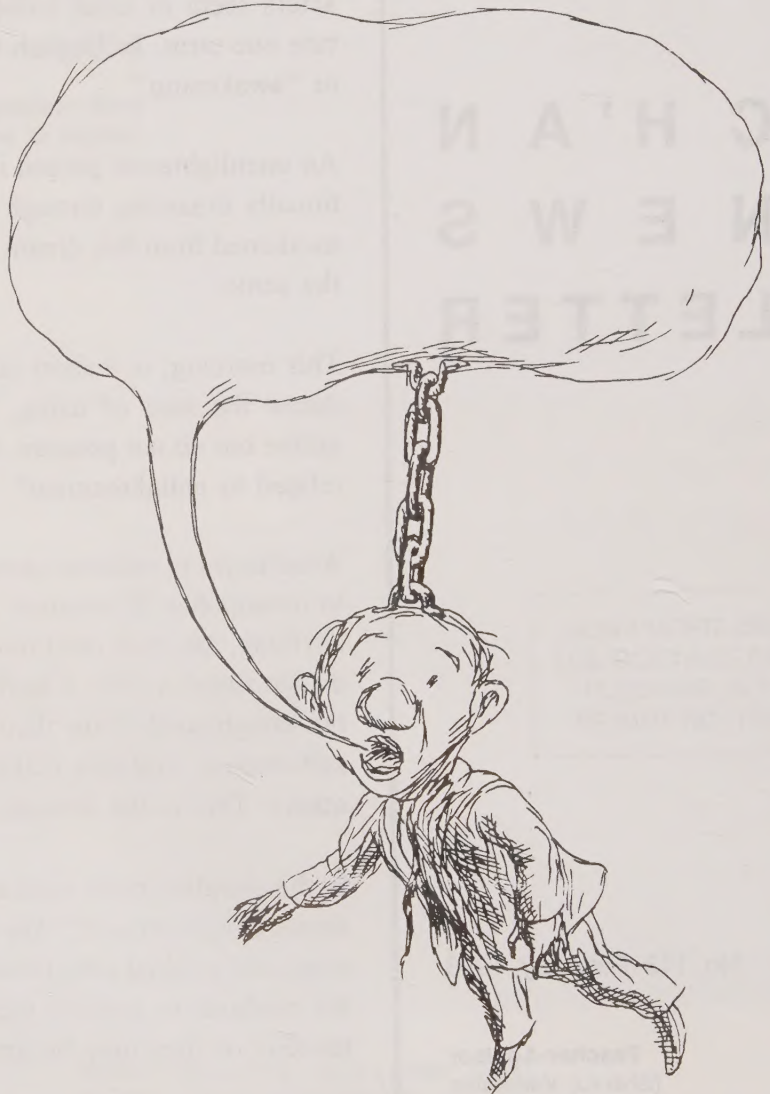
"Enlightened awakening" is an important concept. At this stage, there is nothing to be attained. So, if you understand nothing I say, that may be the best thing, because when you go home and are asked, "what did you learn from that Dharma talk?" you can say, "Nothing to be gained, nothing to be gotten." You should then be congratulated for your deep attainment.

Does this mean that the best thing you can do is to plug up your ears so that you don't hear any-

thing I say, because that will prevent you from getting enlightened. Is that the idea?

Definitely, no.

We must know everything, yet not attach to what we know. We must possess everything, yet lay



*Illusory Thinking?*

Giora Carmi

no claim to it. This is enlightenment, this is awakening. This does not mean to listen like the deaf, nor understand like an idiot. Such people are not enlightened.

But to achieve instantaneous enlightenment, to



abruptly eliminate illusory thinking is quite difficult. For this reason practice is necessary. In this way we strive for a moment in time when, suddenly, our wandering thoughts and our illusory thinking disappears. At that point you might say, "Now I have no illusory thinking." But that thought itself might immediately bring back your illusory thinking. Or, you might utter those words while you were still in a state of illusory thinking. Ridding yourself of illusory thinking completely, you see, and thereby achieving instantaneous enlightenment, is not so easy.

But if you are aware of illusory thinking, this suggests you are not too far from this kind of enlightenment. Knowing that you have illusory thoughts means that you already know what enlightenment is about. If you are in a state of illusory thinking and yet unaware of it, then you have problems.

We have covered two interpretations of instantaneous enlightenment. First, direct entry onto the Mahayana path, and second, the sudden dropping of illusory thinking. Now, I would like to go on to a third explanation.

A third understanding is contained in *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*. This is the Mahayana teaching of instantaneous enlightenment. Those sentient beings of instantaneous karma can get enlightened through this. In other words, the teaching of *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* enables one to go directly to the Mahayana teaching without going through the Hinayana method. The Bodhisattvas who follow this Mahayana teaching are able to obtain enlightenment. The first two interpretations will do, but the third one, which incorporates them both, is better.

As I said earlier, "instantaneous enlightenment" does not necessarily mean that one gets enlightened right away. Anybody studying the Mahayana

method is already a sentient being with an instantaneous enlightenment karma. And also, enlightenment in this teaching can be of many different kinds. It can be the ultimate, Great Enlightenment, attaining Buddhahood; but it can also be a somewhat shallow experience, as someone sleeping who manages to open his eyes for a split second before he goes to sleep.

Have you ever dozed off, only to be nudged on the shoulder by someone? You open your eyes, and glance at them once, before you fall back to sleep. This is analogous to a small enlightenment.

This morning, people staying at the Center were apparently unaware of the change to Daylight Savings Time. Usually residents get up at 4:00 A.M., and today they got up at the same time, but it was 3:00 A.M. At 6:00 Guo-yuan Shi came and said, "We've got to turn the clock back one hour." So you see, we awakened an hour early. Would any of you call this Great Enlightenment?

No, we will still go back to sleep tonight. With a Great Enlightenment, continuing the analogy, once you wake up, you never go back to sleep. There are no longer vexations or obstructions in the mind, no sense of gain or loss.

In Japan I met someone reputed to be an enlightened master. He is married and lives at home with his wife. I said to him, "As an enlightened person, you should have no attachments." He responded, "I have no attachment to my wife, but she has attachment to me." So, do you think that is an appropriate attitude? Is this like saying, "I don't care for money, but money just comes to me." Is this enlightenment? What is really the nature of the relationship with his wife?

He may simply conduct himself in the role of marriage. This is the idea of "using," or behaving



in a particular way, but not attaching. If there were physical desire in their relationship, that would not be liberation.

Even Shakyamuni had to eat, but that does not mean he wasn't enlightened. If you don't eat, you will starve to death. Shakyamuni left his family life behind. The lack of sex and companionship will not kill you. Eating is a basic need, the other is desire. We should not confuse the two.

**Question:** *If the master goes home to his wife out of respectful obligation, but without desire, is this enlightenment?*

If there is no desire, then it is not a contradiction. Even Shakyamuni himself, after his Buddhahood, still took care of his wife and his son.

**Question:** *How do you abstain from desire, yet still keep the desire for liberation?*

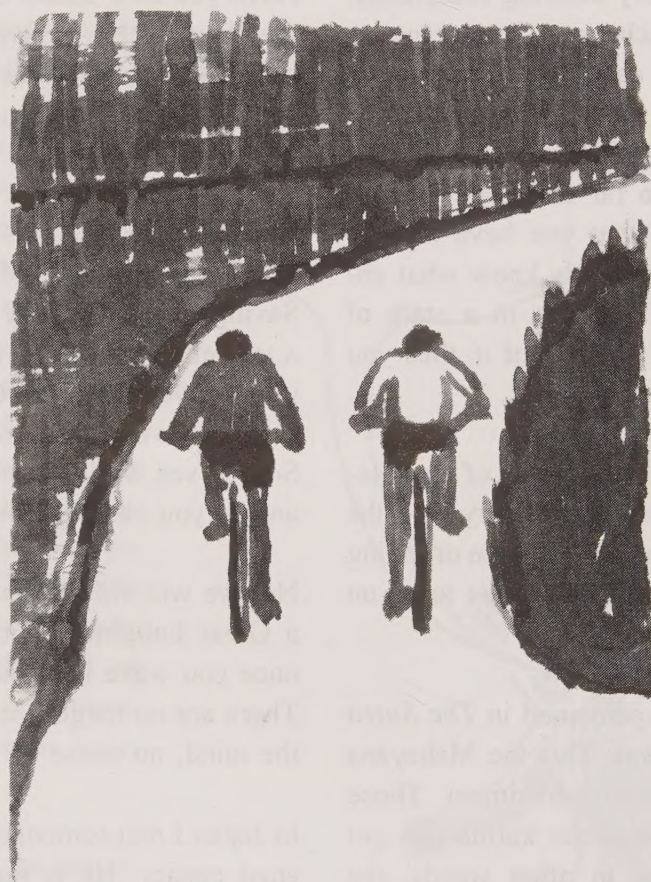
We can divide desire into that which is pure and that which is not pure. Pure desire is really a kind of aspiration. Aspiration may be the closest word, though sometimes we use the word "wish." In Chinese, the word is actually the same as "vow." Thus in the case of enlightenment, we are not talking about impure desire. We refer to a vow or aspiration to go beyond the world.

I would like to explain what is meant by enlightenment. Enlightenment can be very broad or deep, or not very deep. It can be what is considered complete enlightenment. In other instances, hearing even a single phrase of Buddhadharma may cause a change in thinking, and may also be considered a kind of enlightenment. Thus enlightenment does not have to mean the complete elimi-

nation of vexations, for enlightenment can come in a complete or deep manifestation, but it may also come in a partial manifestation.

I will quote from a few sutras. The first quote is from the first chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* (sometimes translated as the *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*), which states that the Buddha explains the right Dharma through a variety of causes and conditions (here, the phrase "causes and conditions" primarily refers to various kinds of actions that Bodhisattvas cultivate in their causal ground and the kind of attainment

or accomplishment they reach), and also through countless fables and analogies that clearly illuminate the Buddha Dharma in order to enlighten all sentient beings. Here the word "enlightenment" basically means (quoting the sutra:), "to make sure that people understand." In this sense, today, I am giving a Dharma talk and the understanding we share is a kind of enlightenment. So we should all be overjoyed that, in this sense, we



Dorothy Weiner



are enlightened.

But perhaps in this context we should not use the word “enlightened,” maybe it’s better to use the word “understanding.” It sounds more plausible to say, “Now, I have understanding of the Dharma,” rather than saying, “Oh, I have enlightenment, I’ve been enlightened,” because there is a general idea that before one is enlightened one is an ordinary sentient being, and that after one is enlightened one is something very special, no longer normal. Throwing around the word “enlightenment” may scare off some people.

People often ask me, “Shih-fu, are you enlightened, or not?” And I always say, “What do you think? Most of the people who study with me hope I am enlightened, because if I am not they may feel, “What’s the use of studying with him?” There also may be people who would prefer that I am not enlightened. They may think that one who is enlightened is a person who is really different. He may eat different kinds of food, he may talk in a different manner, and he may use incomprehensible terms. So some people may prefer that I am not enlightened so that I can still interact and speak in a manner that they can relate to.

When I was a young monk, I knew that some of the elderly monks had achieved excellent cultivation. And when I overheard their conversations, I did not understand at all what they said. I asked, “What were you just saying?” Typically their response would be, “What do you know, little kid?” At that time, I had the idea that enlightened people talked in a way that was incomprehensible.

If you can understand what I say, that means I’m probably not enlightened. If what I say is so abstruse that you’re left in the dark, that means I am enlightened. Do you agree?

Someone just asked, “What is the state of a Ch’an master?” A master who is truly, ultimately enlightened, always knows where he is, during the day, during the night, even while sleeping. He always knows. But a master who has not reached this level might lapse into a “dream” or illusory state.

Another quote, from the *Atavamsaka Sutra* (the eighty-volume version): “To enlighten all sentient beings in darkness or in ignorance.” To enlighten sentient beings, how does one do that? By expounding the Dharma. Regardless of whether the person who is giving the explanation is enlightened or not, and also independent of whether the person who is listening to the teaching will become enlightened or not just the simple action of trying to explain the Dharma is considered the act of enlightening sentient beings.

Once an ancient master, Ashvagosha Bodhisattva, expounded the Dharma through music. Through his music he explained the dharma of emptiness, of selflessness, of suffering, etc., which actually refers to what is usually known as The Three Characteristics of the Dharma, or The Three Seals of the Dharma. And upon expounding the Dharma in this manner, as many as five hundred princes in the city simultaneously were enlightened when they began to have aversion to the Five Desires (the physical world, which is composed of the objects of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch), and all left home to cultivate the path. Here, the word “enlightened” still refers to that kind of intellectual understanding. It does not refer to a true enlightenment, because obviously it does not mean that the five hundred princes, upon hearing music, attained immediate liberation at that moment.

So, to the extent that you have a little understanding of Buddhadharma, though your intent may



not be to leave home like the princes, this is a kind of enlightenment.

Now, I want to discuss this idea of enlightenment, but in greater detail. Here according to the Lotus Sutra the word "enlightenment" should really consist of four words together. The first word can be translated as "open." The second we translate as "show." The third, "awaken," and the fourth, "realization" used in the Dharma sense, not in the sense of understanding. It is a deep, experiential realization.

Up until now, we have not spoke about what one is enlightened to, or what one is awakened to. In the *Lotus Sutra*, "Open" refers to "uncover," and here it basically refers to uncovering the wisdom of the Buddha or "what the Buddha sees" or "what the Buddha sees and knows." "Showing" is the Buddha showing sentient beings what he sees and knows. "Awaken" also means "enlighten," but this is more of an intellectual understanding. And "realization" connotes "experiential." It is the true, personal experience a sentient being has of what the Buddha sees and knows.

"What the Buddha sees and knows" in the *Lotus Sutra* can be further understood as "the Buddha's wisdom," or as "All-Encompassing Wisdom," that is, the Wisdom of Everything.

All-Encompassing Wisdom can be divided into three kinds of wisdom. The first is the Wisdom of Emptiness, also called the Liberation Wisdom. It is a wisdom by which one sees that emptiness is the true characteristic of all phenomena, and it is the wisdom obtained when one is enlightened or liberated.

The second wisdom is the Wisdom of All Paths. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have this kind of wisdom. It is the wisdom that is used to help sentient beings of different backgrounds, of different dis-

positions. Sentient beings need different paths to reach Buddhahood. And this wisdom manifest only after the Wisdom of Emptiness has manifested.

The third wisdom, the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything, only a Buddha can fully manifest. Bodhisattvas who have obtained liberation already, who are sages, understand the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything of the Buddha, but they cannot fully manifest it yet. A Bodhisattva has to wait for the full completion of Buddhahood before manifesting the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything.

Of the four terms discussed, "opening," "showing," "enlightening," and "realizing," the fourth term literally translates as "entering," but it means "entering into realization." I explained the third term ("awaken") as a term of intellectual understanding, but that is only a partial meaning. Another meaning of "awaken" is a partial or sequential entering into realization. For simplicity, we can say that "awaken" can also be understood as a partial and sequential realization.

Complicated, don't you think?

If it seems difficult, just remember these four terms: open, show, awaken, and realizing. They are, of course, verbs, action words. But what object do they take? The object is "what the Buddha sees and knows." By that, we mean the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything.

A further explanation of the Wisdom of the Buddha (the third wisdom), which for lack of a better term we translate as the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything, includes the Wisdom of Emptiness, in which equality or nondifferentiation is emphasized.

The second wisdom, the Wisdom of All Paths,



emphasizes the difference among sentient beings. We recall that with the first wisdom, the emphasis is on equality, equality based on the emptiness. In the second, the Wisdom of All Paths, the emphasis is on the differences of sentient beings. Sentient beings differ, therefore they need different paths and they go by different paths. And then, finally, the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything incorporates and transcends the first two kinds of wisdom.

Since we haven't attained Buddhahood yet, I would like to finish today's talk by talking about Buddhahood.

pretations or understandings. The first understanding is that Buddhahood is attained by accumulated action. For example, in the *Agamas*, and also in some early Dharma discourses, it is said that a practitioner has to go through an enormously long period of time, basically three countless great kalpas, in order to attain Buddhahood.

The second interpretation is that one can attain Buddhahood instantaneously. This interpretation may be further divided into two subcategories. The first includes people who become full, complete Buddhas. In Buddhist history only Shakyamuni has done this. In the other subcategory are people who attain the partial merit and virtue of



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Because now, no matter what stage of enlightenment we are in, we have not reached Buddhahood yet. So, I want to show you how to attain Buddhahood.

What do we mean by becoming a Buddha or attaining Buddhahood? There can be two inter-

the Buddha. Just traveling the path to Buddhahood and attaining the merit and virtue of the Buddha is considered attaining Buddhahood.

There is a Chinese saying, "When one lays down the butcher knife, one attains Buddhahood right away." That indeed is true. When you put down



the knife used for butchery and your mentality is changed, at that moment, you attain partial Buddhahood. To the extent that you who listen to this Dharma talk achieve a new understanding, this is a kind of attainment of Buddhahood.

I'd like to quote again from the Lotus Sutra. Before I go to the quote, I'd like to give an example. When people cultivate any method, such as going to temple and making offerings, this is part of cultivation. For example, when you come to the Center to listen to a Dharma talk, this is cultivation.

People have made offerings today: this is also cultivation. Even something that seems to be insignificant, such as children at play using sand to build a Buddha, considered attaining Buddhahood, because by acting in this way, the children have turned their minds toward Buddhahood. The mentality is there. There is a beginning.

Earlier, I mentioned coming to the temple to make offerings, but what about those people who have not made offerings today? Is that reason for concern? No. Quoting from the *Lotus Sutra*: "If there is someone, even though his mind is scattered and he has no concentration, if he wanders into a stupa or a temple, and says only once, 'I take refuge in the Buddha,' such a one has already attained Buddhahood." So it does not matter why you came to the Center. Is it with real dedication? Or perhaps you weren't very clear-headed and you let some of your friends or relatives talk you into coming even though you were not really willing and enthusiastic. Nonetheless you came and before lunch perhaps you said a few words

taking refuge. Or you performed some other act or acts moving in this direction. In doing these things you have attained Buddhahood. This is to say that anybody who has the opportunity to listen to the Dharma and who knows that he has the



Giora Carmi

potential to attain Buddhahood, or who has unshakable faith that he will attain Buddhahood, such a person has attained Buddhahood.

The *Parinirvana Sutra* states that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature, regardless of what they have done. You may have criticized or slandered the sutras, you may have committed any number of serious offenses, but you, as all sentient beings, can attain Buddhahood. Regardless of whether you have faith or not, regardless of whether you want to attain Buddhahood or not, you will all attain Buddhahood. These are not merely my words. This is a quote from the sutra.

**Question:** From the quote, all you have to do is recite the Buddha's name once, and then you will attain Buddhahood. Is that right?

When I said just reciting the Buddha's name or paying respects at temple will cause you to attain Buddhahood, it should be understood that "attaining Buddhahood" only means planting the



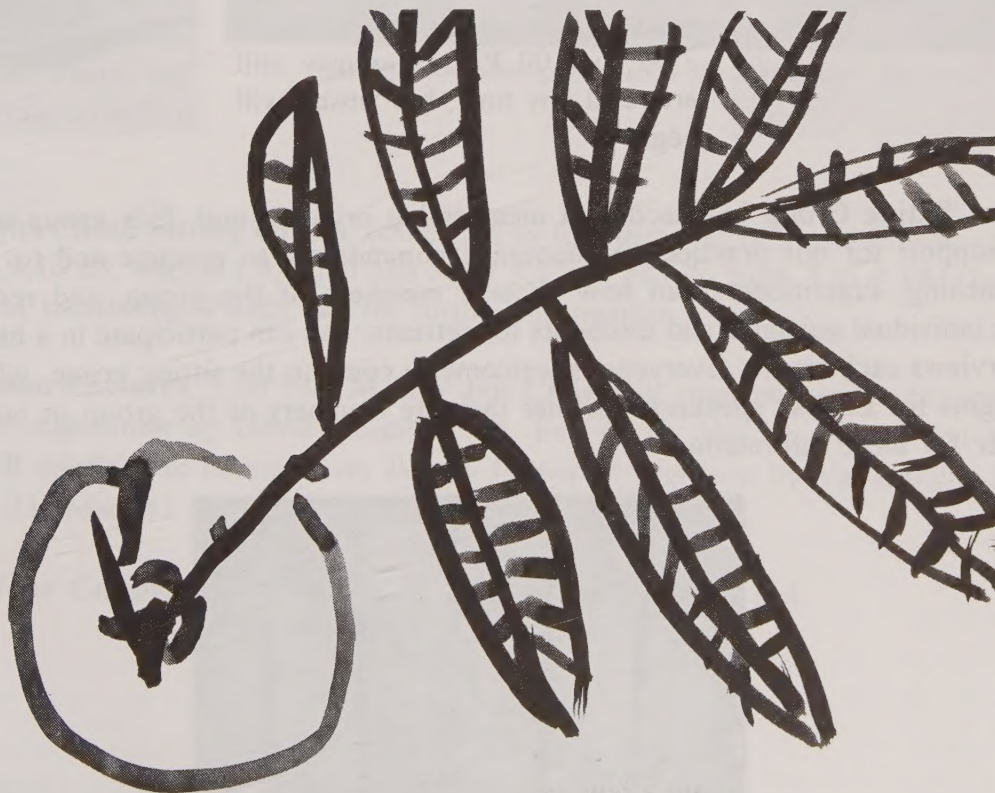
seed for Buddhahood. Planting the seed is the cause. The full ripening, Buddhahood, is the consequence. But we must say that the cause and the consequence are simultaneous. A fully ripened apple is the consequence. But a green apple, a tiny one, is also a consequence.

Again in the *Parinirvana Sutra*, it is said that there are three causes for Buddhahood. The first is called the primary cause, that is, all sentient beings can attain Buddhahood. This is the primary cause of Buddhahood. The second is called the final cause. Shakyamuni Buddha is an example of this. He is the person who completed the full transformation of Buddhahood, so this is called the final cause of Buddhahood. And the third is called "the conditional causes." This applies to every point in the path. Different points in the path, different situations, all lead sentient beings to move on and on to full, complete Bud-

dhahood. This is also called "the conditions as cause." So altogether we have three kinds of causes for Buddhahood.

As a summary, the *Parinirvana Sutra* has these two lines, which say that consequence pervades throughout all the causes, and that causes incorporate all consequences. In other words, from the perspective of the consequence, everything is cause, everything is consequence. From the perspective of the cause, everything is consequence, everything is cause. This is, of course, not all that easy to understand

So, today, even though I couldn't speak very well, I am grateful to everybody who is still sitting here. Maybe I should be grateful to Mr. Chang, who was at the door at the front. Perhaps he slept through my talk and prevented anyone from getting past.



Nora Ling-yun Shih



## News from the Center:

Guo-gu Shi was in Stockholm, Sweden, from Jan. 16 through 22. He lectured, gave a beginning meditation workshop and lead a one day retreat.

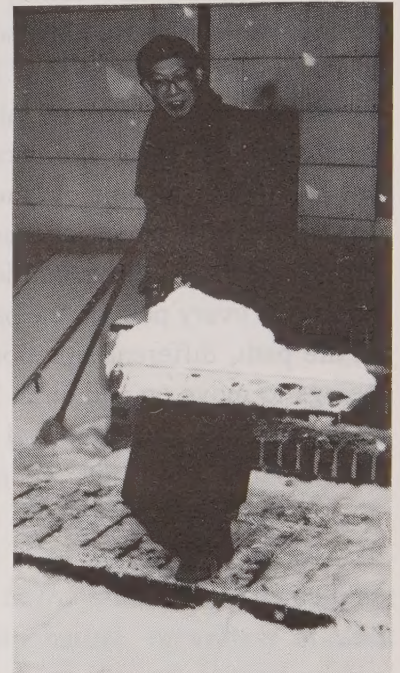
On Feb. 11 Guo-yuan Shi will present a beginning meditation workshop and retreat for Chinese speakers in Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

Guo-chou Shi will be in Austin, Texas from Feb. 15 through 18 to give a beginning meditation workshop and lead a one day retreat. For information please contact Jason Wey, 512-346-7376.



Guo-gu Shi has been invited to give a lecture and a beginners' meditation workshop at the Seventh Annual Asian American Intercollegiate Conference, at Harvard University on Feb. 17. For information contact Saukok Chu-kan, e-mail: [schu@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:schu@fas.harvard.edu)

The time for group meditation on Tues and Thurs. nights has been changed from 7:30 to 9:00 PM, to 7:00 to 9:00 PM. You may still arrive at any time, but sitting will begin at 7.



The Ch'an Sitting Group has become a membership organization! This group is intended to provide support for our practice, to encourage commitment to practice and to provide clear Ch'an teaching. Practitioners can now become members of the group, and receive benefits including individual guidance and discounts for retreats, and can participate in a half day retreat with interviews each month. Everyone is welcome to come to the sitting group, which meets on Friday nights for English speakers, whether they are members of the group or not. Please call the Center for more information.





## Upcoming Events:

**Beginners' Meditation Workshops:** Saturday Feb. 10, March 9 or April 20, from 9 AM to 1 PM, in English. Methods of sitting and walking meditation, breathing, sleeping, yoga exercises and massage will be covered, as well as the theory and stages of meditation practice. Please call for further information and to register.

**Introductory One-day Meditation Retreat:** Saturday March 23 from 9 AM to 5 PM. Please call for further information and to register.

**One Day Ch'an Retreat:** April 6, 9 AM to 8 PM. Please call for further information and to register.

**Two-day Ch'an Retreat:** March 15, 7 PM to March 17, 5 PM. Please call for further information and to register.

**Three-day Ch'an Meditation Retreat:** Feb. 17, 9 AM to Feb. 19, 5 PM. Please call for further information and to register.



*Sunday food offering. Guo-shun Shi and Master Jen Chun*

**The Friday Night Ch'an Sitting Group**, conducted by four disciples of Master Sheng-yen, will meet on Feb. 2, 9, 16, 23, March 1, 8, 22, 29 and April 5, 12, 19 and 26 from 7 to 9 PM, followed by a half hour of socializing. Please call for further information.

**Sunday Afternoon Lectures, 1:30 PM:** Master Jen Chun will comment on the *Discourse on a Man of Noble Aspiration* by Devabodhisattva on Feb 4, 25; Mar. 3, 10, 24 and May 5. Professor Li will continue to comment on *Twenty Verses of Yogacara* by Vasubandhu Bodhisattva on Feb. 11, Mar. 31 and April 7, 21 and 28.

**Chinese New Year Celebration:** Sunday Feb. 25 from 10 AM to 4 PM.



## Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

**Recitation Group:** Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

**Group Meditation:** Tues. and Thurs. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M.

**Ch'an Sitting Group:** Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

**Sunday Program:** Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

**First Saturday of each month:** One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call for details and to register.

**Last Saturday of each month:** Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

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